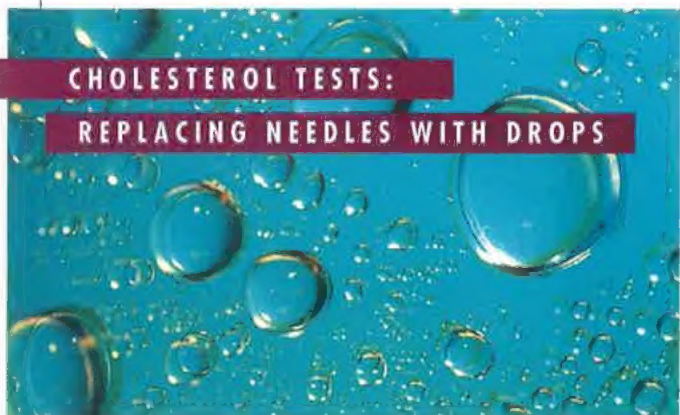


CHOLESTEROL TESTS:

REPLACING NEEDLES WITH DROPS



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IMPROVING MEDICAL TESTS

The next time you go for a checkup, you may find several tests have gotten faster, easier, less painful or more accurate.

► **Breath Test For Ulcers.** The FDA has approved a simple breath test for *H. pylori*, the bacteria behind most ulcers. Patients drink a colorless, tasteless solution called *Pranactin* and then breathe into a collection kit. Lab analysis takes one or two days. In studies, the test was about 95 percent accurate. It's already available to gastroenterologists and will be in primary-care docs' offices by year's end.

The test's best use might not be spotting *H. pylori*—since if you have ulcers, you most likely have the bug—but confirming it's gone once you've been treated.

► **A Bloodless Cholesterol Test.** Home cholesterol checks could soon involve no more than putting a drop of solution on your

hand for 30 seconds, washing it off and adding another solution. The resulting color change signals one of three cholesterol ranges: under 200 (low), 200–240 (moderately elevated) or over 240 (high). Clinical trials are set to begin within months; if all goes well, the test could be out by the end of next year.

► **The Best Colon Cancer Test.** It's known colorectal cancer screening (recommended yearly after age 50) with fecal occult blood tests saves lives.

Now researchers have uncovered the most accurate test available: the HemeSelect. It detects more cancers and has the lowest chance of false positives. Yet it's not the most used, since it's more costly and requires more lab work than the most common test, the Hemoccult II.

A simple breath test can expose ulcer-causing bacteria

“To avoid false positives with the Hemoccult II—the test you're still most likely to get—for two days beforehand try to stay away from red or processed meats, lamb, liver, horseradish, turnips, melons, radishes, alcohol and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs,” says James Allison, MD, of Kaiser Permanente, Oakland, who headed the study. “To avoid false negatives, don't take more than 250 mg of vitamin C a day for two days before.”

SLEEP AWAY NECK PAIN.

For years, waterbeds have been touted for curing everything from back pain to a fizzling sex life. Now water may be proving therapeutic in a new form: pillows.

In a recent study, 41 adults with chronic neck pain (caused by arthritis, bone spurs or injuries) slept with three different pillows for two weeks each: their own bed pillow, a cylindrical roll and a water-based pillow. Participants rated the water pillow about twice

as effective at relieving neck pain. It also improved sleep quality.

The pillow—four inches of padding over a water bag—prevents neck strain by naturally conforming to the head and neck and adjusting to new positions as the sleeper moves. “It appears especially beneficial for neck pain that's accompanied by morning headaches or morning arthritic pain,” says study coauthor

TALK ABOUT STIFF NECKS!



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Marco Pappagallo, MD, head of the neurology and pain service, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

The study used a Mediflow water pillow. It's carried in some rehabilitation supply stores, or call 888-763-3435. About \$50.

SAFER SURGERY FOR WEAK HEARTS

For someone with heart disease, surgery—any surgery—can trigger a